

stay a little longer (with me) by nessonmain

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Angst, Hurt-Comfort

Language: English

Characters: Mike W., Will B.

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-11-17 19:09:19

Updated: 2017-12-10 12:28:58

Packaged: 2019-12-17 03:03:39

Rating: T

Chapters: 2

Words: 13,938

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: A series of connected byler oneshots. #1, ugly/beautiful: "It's not that Mike thinks he's ugly. He knows he doesn't have any of the usual qualities that someone considered "ugly" has. But, at the same time, he knows he isn't amazing looking, either."

1. ugly beautiful

ugly/beautiful

Warnings: *self-hatred, self-harm, panic attack, suicidal thoughts & suicide attempt, brief binge eating, and non-specified but descriptive mental disorders.*

It's not that Mike thinks he's ugly. He knows he doesn't have any of the usual qualities that someone considered "ugly" has. But, at the same time, he knows he isn't amazing looking, either.

His hair is long – too long, really – but he doesn't want to waste his time getting a haircut when he could be planning the next campaign instead. He had never liked his hair; it was an ugly shade of brown in some lighting, pitch black in others, and he constantly wishes he had a nicer, more consistent shade of brown, like Dustin or Nancy's. Sometimes he had curls sprouting everywhere, and sometimes he had to push aside straight strands of hair falling into his eyes. It was like his body couldn't choose, brown or black, curly or straight. And god, he *hates* it.

Mike likes control. He likes to plan out every last detail in every interaction he had, arranging his action figures in a way that made sense – grouped all the Star Wars figures together, all the dinosaurs in a circle apart from them. Just the fact that he has so little sway over how he looks makes him itch. He wishes his body would just choose a side so he wouldn't feel disgusting every time someone mentions his hair. (It doesn't help that it's a prime target for bullying, getting him called gay more times than he can count. He always has to shove away thoughts of Will's soft eyes and pretty face so that he doesn't get himself into more trouble.)

He knows his face isn't a pleasure to look at, either. When he looks at his face, he can't see the supposed kind eyes and friendly expression his mom says he has. He sees someone uncomfortable in his own skin, eyes sad and mouth twisted into a grimace when he tries to fake a smile, and he wonders if he actually fools anyone when he says he's fine. His eyes are a dull brown, swimming with emotions he can't

control, and he can't seem to school his face into a semi-neutral expression no matter how hard he tries. Yet another thing he can't control, he notes. He remembers asking Santa for different eyes for the Christmas of 1979. He was eight years old and he asked for bright blue eyes to replace his murky brown ones for his Christmas present. Obviously, he didn't get what he wanted, considering that's kind of impossible.

Freckles splatter his cheeks like paint flecks, and he frowns at them, wondering why he always seemed to pull the short straw in the pool of genetics. None of his family have freckles. Every now and then, he gets the urge to borrow (steal) Nancy's make up and fumble his way into covering them up, but he knows he'd have to wash it off at the end of the day and they'd be back, mocking him in a way only his own face can. The freckles stand out painfully against his pale skin, and he wishes he could get tan so he wouldn't have to see them anymore, but he burns easily in the sunlight. The world seems to be against him, sometimes. He hates the way his face looks almost stark white when his hair darkens with the world around it, and he hates the face that he looks like a ghost in that lighting. (He pushes aside the thought that that's most accurate description he's heard in a long time.)

His limbs are long and he's overall gangly. Lucas likes to poke fun by telling him to *eat up, what did you have today, birdseed?* Mike'd never tell, but the teasing always makes him shift in his seat, arms reaching up to cross over his stomach in a useless attempt to hide himself. He had hit a growth spurt a few months after his 14th birthday, and no matter what he does now, he looks skinnier than normal. He never told anyone, but one weekend when his friends were too busy to hang out, he had snuck into the kitchen and stole as much food as he could carry, making sure his father was snoring on the La-Z-Boy before running as quick as he dared to his room and fumbling with his lock until it turned. He had sat himself down in the corner of his closet, briefly thought of *her*, and shut the door. He hadn't wanted to do it in the light. It felt almost *dirty*, somehow. He gorged himself on food until he felt nauseous, until he felt that if he ate one more bite he would vomit all over his clothes. He had cried then, feeling like he'd gained 20 pounds while sat in darkness.

(He hadn't even gained a pound, and Mike wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or disgusted.)

Okay, maybe Mike thinks he's a little ugly. But it's okay. No one ever says it to his face, but he knows they're all thinking it. They're all trying to spare his feelings, but they haven't noticed how much he already hates himself. Sometimes, he wants comfort, to be bundled in a warm pair of arms so he can cry into their chest, but he never indulges himself. He doesn't deserve it. His problems are small and simple, so he should be able to handle it all by himself, right? They should be focusing on bigger issues, like Will's nightmares or El's safety. They should be having fun; it's summer, they're kids, they shouldn't be worried about someone as worthless as him. He never let anyone know just *how* okay with the idea of death he really is, because it's not like he's going to stab himself so he can bleed out on his bathroom floor. (He doesn't think about the pool of blood dripping on to the tiled floor from his wrists. It's not important. He's fine.) It's just that if the opportunity's there, he won't say no.

He's never been important to the party, anyways, they could do just fine without him. Everyone would gear up to protect El and Will, so there's nothing left for him. After all, what good is a motivator when no one needs motivating? And yeah, sometimes he gets the urge to bike to the quarry and stand on the edge again, but this time, jumping off without Troy's countdown, Dustin yelling, and James' worried statements that had mixed in with the heavy sound of his heartbeat to make an almost deafening cacophony of sounds. He'd almost done it, too, but right as he had been standing on the edge, once more looking down at the peaceful water down below, he realized he hadn't left a note. He didn't want his family to go insane, trying to find his "murderer", so he had taken one longing glance at the water, stepped back, hopped on his bike, and rode home.

Mike never told anyone that one, either. He finds himself lying to his friends more and more, and feels guilty every time they believe him. *Friends don't lie*, he remembers telling El, but just this once, he pushes aside the promise. They shouldn't worry about him. He's not worth it.

Will thinks there's something wrong with Mike.

Now, he knows that life had been rough, but Will can feel in his heart that what's hurting his best friend isn't connected to the Upside Down (*for once*, he can't help but think bitterly). No, this is something else.

Will notices how Mike tends to curl into himself when sitting, usually pulling his legs up to his chest. He slouches when standing in an effort to look smaller, and he's long since started wearing oversized sweaters year-round to hide how skinny he is. (Will can barely restrain himself from telling Mike how cute he looks with the sleeves falling over his hands. He doesn't want to lose Mike over something as trivial as *sweater paws*.) Mike always seems to be trying to take up as little room as possible, and Will's not really sure *why*; Mike's never exactly commanded attention before, but now he's started consciously shying away from it, always staying out of the limelight.

Will notices how Mike's always messing with the hair on the nape of his neck, and Will thinks Mike should just cut it already, but he doesn't say anything, because he likes Mike's hair the way it is. Mike's always trying to flatten down the curls to no avail. Will sees how his hair curls around the bottom of his ears and Will's been mesmerized by the colour seemingly changing in the light ever since the first time he saw it (in kindergarten, he thinks). And Will *knows* that Mike's hair is soft. He's never told anyone, but Mike loves it when people card their hands through his hair. Mike had told Will once in confidence that that's what his mom does to calm him from a nightmare. None of the others know, of course (except maybe El, because who knows what she found out when they were dating), so Will takes advantage of rubbing Mike's head whenever no one's looking, and he revels in the way Mike leans up into his hand.

Will loves how soft and kind Mike's face has stayed through puberty. He still has enough chub on his cheeks that he almost looks like a very tall child instead of a teenager. His eyes were the perfect shape for the puppy-dog eyes that Will could never say no to, and the freckles that ran across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose somehow reminded Will of cookies and cream. Sometimes, Will just wants to connect the dots to see what kind of shape they'd make, but he doesn't think Mike would appreciate having pen on his face. Mike's skin glows ethereally when his back's toward the light, and Will adores how smooth it is. Puberty had been kind to him, sparing

him from too much acne, leaving him looking like the perfect boy who your parents would love. Of course, he still has his rebellious spouts, always ending with him sitting in the counselor's office, arms crossed and a snarl on his face, but the girls fawning over him seem to ignore that. Or maybe they *like* it, maybe it adds to the appeal by showing that he's human too, but Will's not sure.

He thinks Mike's beautiful, but he can tell there's something plaguing him. He can see it in Mike's face, the sadness flooding his soft brown eyes, his face pulled into a painful looking smile that doesn't reach his eyes. He can see it in the way Mike flinches slightly whenever he gets a compliment, the way he either picks at his food without eating or shoves it down his throat far too quickly. He can see it when Mike freezes as soon as someone looks at him, a nervous expression on his face. It's in the way Mike never wears short sleeves, and the way he never lets his sleeves ride up. He sees it when Mike sometimes lets his eyes linger on knives for *far* too long.

Will can see there's something wrong, but he doesn't fully understand until he walks into the school bathroom to see Mike doubled over the sink hyperventilating.

Mike had been sitting in his last period of the day, math, bored out of his mind as Mr. Wakefeld droned on about integers. His leg was bouncing – when had his leg started bouncing? His pencil fell out of his hand as he tried to figure out *why* his leg started bouncing in the first place, and the pencil hitting the ground shouldn't have startled him as much as it did, but the room had been almost silent apart from the voice of the teacher. Everyone turned to look at him, and he could feel his heart jump into his throat. His eyes darted around the room before he reached down and picked up the pencil with shaking hands. He cursed himself for getting so nervous when it was just his classmates staring at him. (*All of their attention on him, one wrong move and they'd all find a way to hate him even more than they already did.*) Then, the next moment, the class shifted back to normal, and Mike wanted to be relieved, he really did, but the lump in his throat wouldn't leave no matter how much he willed it to, and he could feel a stinging behind his eyes. He let a few minutes pass before excusing himself to the bathroom.

He stalks down the hallway to the bathroom farthest away from any classrooms, knowing that no one bothered to go there during class time. As soon as the door shuts behind him, he has the edge of one of the sinks in a death grip, setting his gaze on his mess of a face. His cheeks are flushed, the red standing out in stark contrast to how pale the rest of his face is – paler than normal, he means. There's tears beginning to gather in the corner of his eyes, which make it look like he's in the middle of a panic attack (which, honestly, isn't too far off) when combined with his dilated pupils. His bottom lip is shaking, and, for once, he follows his urge, running his hand through his hair. It doesn't work the way he was hoping it would, the calming feeling not coming when it's his own hand, and all it ends up doing is making his hair poof up and curl in that nauseating way.

Seeing his own loss of control happen right in front of his eyes breaks something inside Mike, and suddenly the floodgates are open. The tears in his eyes spill out over his cheeks, only to be replaced with new ones not two seconds later. His whole body was wracked with sobs, and when he let go of the sink to try to wipe his face, he doubled over, chest heaving as he desperately tried to take in enough air to please his body. A few tears snuck their way into his gaping mouth, and the salt made him gag. His lungs are constricting and he's wheezing, trying to breathe but *he can't*.

He barely registers the sound of the door opening and then closing again, but the noises are distorted, and it sounds like he has a cup over his ears. He hears a familiar voice calling his name, but his thoughts are racing too quickly for him to be able to place the voice, let alone respond. The voice grows more insistent, and he claps his hands over his ears and squeezes his eyes shut, wishing they'd just go away so he could have a breakdown in peace. Either they didn't get his silent message or they just ignored it, because then he feels hands on his shoulders, squeezing gently once, twice, and slowly lowering him to sit on the ground. Immediately after they stop moving him, he draws his legs toward his chest in a slight effort to be smaller. The hands on his shoulders are rubbing small circles into his skin, and their voice keeps talking to him even though he hasn't tried to respond.

"Mike, could you try to let me know if you're understanding me right

now? I know you can't talk right now, so just nod if you can, okay?" The voice is quiet and soft and muffled by his hands, and Mike's gut is telling him he can trust them, so he does his best to sneak in a nod in between the sharp shakes of his body. "Okay, Mike, okay, thank you. Can you open your eyes?" They – he, Mike's brain says, the voice is a boy's, and Mike's not sure how his brain is even functioning enough to tell him that – sound relieved and concerned at the same time. Mike shakes his head violently, He can't help but feel like if he opens his eyes, the world'll be spinning around him fast enough to make him vomit.

"Okay, that's fine," his voice reassures, "how about taking your hands off your ears? What about that?" *Okay*, Mike thinks, that's something he can do. He moves his hands and they hover in the air, trembling but not knowing where to go. One hand leaves his shoulder and grabs his hand, leading it forward until it's resting on a chest. Mike can feel his savior's steady, albeit faster than normal, heartbeat, and he clutches onto the shirt clumsily. "Mike," he starts, giving his hand a squeeze, "could you try breathing with me now? Just pay attention to my breaths and try to follow the rhythm." Mike nods his head a little and listens to the sound of breathing for a few seconds, before he starts to try and breathe deeper, slower. His breath hitches as another sob shakes his frame, tears somehow not yet run dry even though it feels as if it's been hours since he started crying. He starts to panic again involuntarily, his brain telling him that he just screwed himself royally, that he'll never calm down at this rate, but the voice just shushes him, saying it's alright, saying to take as much time as he needs.

It takes far longer than he hoped, but his breathing eventually reaches a more manageable level, and his lungs are thanking him. Mike finally had enough of a mind to think, and his first thought was that his eyes *hurt*. He forces himself to open his eyes, wincing as he's met with the bright fluorescent lights of the bathroom. His eyes adjust and he looks, though his vision's muddled with tears, at the worried face of Will Byers.

Concern washes over Will in waves when he registers that Mike's having a panic attack, and he's a little afraid, because usually it's the

other way around. Will's not sure how to deal with this, so he resolves to channel his inner Mike. He calls his name, but Mike doesn't respond. The sight of Mike shaking, tears streaming down his face spurs Will into action, and he shuffles over to Mike, calling his name again. Mike screws his eyes shut and clamps his hands over his ears, and Will has known him long enough to understand that Mike wants to be alone. He ignores it, because he also knows that having a panic attack all alone is one of the worst things he's ever experienced, and he'd sooner die than knowingly forcing someone into that.

He reaches out, hesitantly placing his hands on Mike's shoulders, squeezes the way Mike's squeezed his hands so many times, and lowers him to the ground as gently as he can. Mike curls into himself as much as possible, and all Will knows to do is to rub circles into his shoulders and keep talking. The words spill out of him, and Will's not sure where exactly they came from, but he can see Mike nodding through his sobs, and Will pushes aside the thoughts in favour of his friend. He asks Mike to open his eyes, because his eyelids are shut so tightly that it looks *painful*, but Mike shakes his head, his hair bouncing slightly.

Will knows better than to force him to open them, so he moves on to his hands, which are still over his ears. Will's got a semblance of an idea, so he really hopes Mike'll cooperate. Luckily, Mike takes his hands off his ears and he leaves them hovering in front of him, so Will grabs one of his hands and brings it to his chest. Feeling a heartbeat always helps him when he's freaking out, and he knows Mike feels the same way when he feels fingers curling into the fabric of his shirt. He asks Mike to breathe with him, 'cause if he keeps heading down the path he's currently on, he'll end up passing out. He gets a nod in return, and 10 seconds later Mike's trying to breathe deeper. His rhythm is interrupted by a sob, and he can see Mike's panic clear as day.

"Hey, Mike, it's okay, it's alright. No need to rush, you're doing fine, take as long as you need," he tells him softly, squeezing Mike's hand. It feels like he's waiting forever, but eventually Mike's breathing reach a somewhat acceptable level, and suddenly Mike's opening his eyes only to make a face at the light. A few seconds pass in silence, and then Mike's opening his eyes again, and his eyes stay open this

time. His eyes are filling up with tears as he looks straight at Will's face, and Will watches as his face scrunches up. Mike lets out a sob that Will thinks is an attempt at his name, and Will hears the plea behind that one semi-word. "C'mon, Mikey," he holds his arms open, "c'mere." The air in his lungs escapes him as Mike practically tackles him in a hug, and before he can blink, there's a face buried in his shoulder. There are tears staining his shirt, but he just wraps his arms around Mike.

It seems like they're sitting on the bathroom floor for hours, and at one point Will leans his head on Mike's and his hand moves to sift through Mike's hair in the way he knows Mike likes best. He can feel Mike's whole body relax against him, and the arms clinging him somehow manage to tighten. And then, finally, Mike's tears run dry and he lifts his head from Will's shoulder. He inhales and holds it, his breath shaking when he breathes out. Mike sits up fully, but he doesn't move his arms from where they're locked around Will. Mike's face is blotchy and tear-streaked, and he still looks sad, but Will finds him beautiful nonetheless. Mike gives him a grateful smile, and his voice is scratchy and hoarse when he says *thank you*. His hair's all messed up, so Will reaches out and brushes it back into place with his fingers. When he tucks a piece of hair behind Mike's ear on an impulse, Mike looks up at him through long eyelashes and the whole thing feels extremely intimate (which, Will supposes, it actually is), and Will can only hope his face isn't bright red by now.

Will gets the urge to kiss him then, and for once, his mind isn't telling him not to. He dares to lean in, staring into Mike's eyes, and his heart starts pounding faster when Mike's eyes flick down to his lips for a moment. And in that moment, Will's keenly aware of his hand holding Mike's cheek, of Mike biting his lip and his arms still holding Will in a loose hug. Mike flutters his eyes closed and tilts his head just the slightest bit when their lips are about an inch apart, and Will can feel Mike's breath on his face, and he *cannot believe he's actually about to kiss him*. Will takes a deep breath and closes the gap between them, pausing for a moment, unsure, but he can feel the ghost of Mike's lips on his, and he knows that if he doesn't suck it up now, he'll never end up doing it.

He shuts his eyes and presses his lips to Mike's gently, and *god*, it

feels so right. Having Mike's slightly chapped lips against his own feels like he's finally coming home, and it certainly helps that *Mike's kissing back*. This is the kind of thing that would only ever happen in his dreams, and he gets the fleeting thought that he should pinch himself, just to see if he's actually asleep; instead, he just kisses Mike a little harder, wanting this moment to last forever, dream or not. He pulls back just a bit, but he's close enough that he can count the freckles on Mike's cheeks, and the smile that breaks out on his face is a sight to behold. Will's smiling back now, and he's just about to ask if that was okay when-

BRRRING!

The school bell yells out, and then Will's detaching himself from Mike hastily, knowing that soon enough the room will be filled with other students. He stands up on numb legs and holds out a hand to pull Mike up, who accepts the offer with much more grace than should be possible. Mike's wiping his face with his hands when Will asks him to come over to his house. Mike nods and offers him one last smile (that, Will notes, looks strained compared to the one he gave just a minute ago) before rushing off to explain to his teacher and grab his bag.

Will waits outside the school for Mike, ignoring the confused look that his brother sends him from inside the car. When Mike finally walks out, he doesn't look any better – in fact, he almost looks *worse* than how Will had left him. Usually Mike could brush off any scolding with a scoff and rolling his eyes, but Will supposes he's just too exhausted and vulnerable to even put up a front. He trudges over to where Will's standing, and he croaks out "should I bike there or should I put it in the back?"

Will shrugs. "Let me ask," he calls over his shoulder, already walking to the car. He taps on the window and Jonathan rolls it down compliantly. "Hey, um, Mike's coming over and I *really* don't think he should be alone right now, so could he, maybe, ride home with us and put his bike in the trunk?" Will says all in one breath, and Jonathan's craning his neck to get a good look at Mike. Something about Mike must pull at his heartstrings, because Jonathan's face shifts into muted concern.

"Tell Mike to get his bike over here, I'll try to make some room in the trunk," He says, getting out of the car. Will gives him a thankful smile and runs over to Mike. Somehow, they do fit the bike in the trunk (though it's definitely a tight squeeze) and Mike and Will slide into the backseat, Will abandoning the front seat in favour of holding Mike's hand. If Jonathan notices, he doesn't say anything, which Will is extremely grateful for. There's only so much he can handle in one day.

They ride in silence until Jonathan turns on some music, and when *Should I Stay or Should I Go* comes on, Mike snuffles, loud and wet. Will moves his other hand onto Mike's as well, doing his best to engulf Mike's hand with his smaller ones. The drive passes by with little else happening, much to Will's relief, and they arrive at the Byers house safe and sound. The boys scramble into the house behind Jonathan, and head down to Will's room almost immediately. Will sits down gingerly on his bed and tugs Mike down to sit with him by their still intertwined hands.

"Mikey," Will broke the almost suffocating silence that sat between them, "why were you having a panic attack?"

Mike looked nervous. "I-it wasn't a *panic attack*, per say, it w-was more of an emotional breakdown..." He trailed off when he saw the look on Will's face – he wasn't in the mood for Mike's stalling. "Okay, okay, I just- I just really like to be in control of everything I do and say, and- and I can't control so many things about the way I look is just so *frustrating*. I wish I could change what I look like, I know I'm so *goddamn ugly* but I can't change that. I hate my hair, I hate the colour of it, and I know that my parents would never let me dye it. I hate that it changes from curly to straight to a disgusting combination. I hate that no one else in my family has the same colour, the same inconsistent hair that I have. I hate my freckles, I hate that they stand out so much against my skin; I hate my skin and the way it stands out so much against my hair.

"I hate my face; my eyes aren't warm or bright, they're just dull and boring to look at, and I can never keep my emotions off my face the way everyone else can and I just, I just hate that. And I'm too tall, I hate being taller than most everyone because I always get scared of people taller than me and I don't w-want to scare anyone. I'm so

skinny, too, and I never gain any weight no matter how much I eat, and I feel like I don't belong in my own skin. Everyone was looking at me, Will, they were all staring and it felt like they were seeing everything I hate about myself, so I had to leave, I just had to. And then, when I looked at myself in the mirror, I saw a mess, I was just a *mess*. I tried to look calm, but it just wasn't *working*, and I ran my hand through my hair to see if that would help but it didn't, it just made my curls come out and I just- I *lost it*, Will. I broke down."

Will had been staring, an increasingly concerned expression on his face, throughout Mike's rambling. Mike started crying halfway through, stumbling over some words and voice cracking in the middle of others, and all Will can think to do is squeeze his hand and try to say something in response.

"Mike, I don't know why you see yourself as ugly when you're one of the most beautiful people I've ever met." The words slipped out before Will could think them through, and now it's Mike's turn to stare. He managed a small noise of confusion before Will surged onward. "You're so pretty, Mike. It makes me feel gross when you talk bad about yourself, because you can't seem to see what I see when I look at you. And you wanna know what I see?" Mike's mouth is agape as he slowly nods.

Will smiles. "Well, I see one of the nicest boys I've ever met with a body that really reflects who he is. He's tall and skinny, quick and nimble while he stands over the rest of us like a protector. His hair is soft and it's always changing depending on the light, and I *adore* that. It's one of the prettiest things I've ever seen. And his cheeks are smooth and squishy, and I love the freckles on his nose. Sometimes I want to kiss every last one of them, but I never have, I've always been too scared. I love the way his skin glows – it reminds me of an angel. He doesn't get much acne, and he's the kind of guy you'd introduce to your parents without worrying once about it. I see someone who loves soft sweaters and helping other people out – someone who lets the emotion show on his face in the *best* way, so you always know he's telling the truth. I see someone you can trust."

Mike's face is shifting through several different emotions, but the most prominent are shock, confusion, and happiness, as far as Will can tell. And then he notices that Mike's started scratching at his

sleeve at some point. "I see someone who never wears short sleeves," he adds quietly, and Mike's arm jerks away from where it's scratching. The only thing Will can see on Mike's face is fear. He flips Mike's arm so it's facing towards him, and he tries to ignore Mike's shaking as he gently pulls up the sleeve. The scars are horrifying to him, and Will almost wants to throw up, but he just swallows through the lump in his throat and keeps looking. Some are white and faded, some are a light red, and some are an angry bright red. He lightly traces a few of the scars with his thumb and chances looking up at Mike.

The expression on Mike's face is almost more heartbreaking than the scars themselves; his bottom lip is trembling, his brow is furrowed, and his eyes are shining with unshed tears. "I'm sorry," he whispers, "please don't hate me."

Will shakes his head slowly, murmuring "I could never, *ever* hate you." He looks back at Mike's arm, "I'm just... sad that you didn't feel like you could tell me."

"No, no, it's not you! It's just that I feel like my problems are so small compared to everything else, I feel like I should be able to handle it by myself."

Will can feel his face twisting up, "Mike, this isn't small at all, but even if it were, you would still be able to tell us. I'm- *we're* your friends, we're here to help with *anything* at all, no matter how small. You know that, right?" Mike just nodded, eyes pleading for Will to pull the sleeve back down. "Just, please know you can always talk to me about anything. I've known you for, what, 8 years now? I'd be crushed if anything happened to you. I don't think I'd be able to handle it. Please, try to stop. *Please*, I know it'll take time but just..." Will trails off, tears welling in his eyes at the thought of life without Mike by his side.

Mike is overwhelmed. First, he gets comforted (and *kissed*, his brain cheers) by Will Byers, the boy he's been repressing feelings for since 5th grade. Then he gets yelled at by Mr. Wakefeld until he turns to face him, and he must look worse than he usually does, since the teacher immediately trails off, only adding a quick "Are you doing

alright, Michael?" Mike nods and grabs the stuff he left at his seat and walks out of the room as quickly as he'd entered. Then, he's spilling everything he's been keeping to himself to his best friend, and his best friend tells him he's beautiful (one of the best things he's heard in his life). Will's pulling up his sleeve but for *some reason* he can't seem to make his arm move away, so Will sees the ugly scars on his arm, but he says he *doesn't* hate him. Will's thinking about Mike dying and he's crying and *oh god he's crying it's my fault oh god-*

Get a grip, Wheeler. You're not the one crying just because you imagined your best friend killing himself (*oh god*), suck it up.

Mike wants to tell Will that he's never thought about it, that he's never tried it, but Will literally *just* got done telling him he can talk about anything. It would feel so wrong to not tell Will. So Mike quietly tells Will about when he went to the quarry and stood on the edge. He tells Will that he had felt excited, that his lips were curled into a smile as he imagined his last moments being full of exhilaration. He tells Will that the only reason he hadn't gone through with it was because he hadn't written a note. Tears are streaming down Will's face and Mike feels worse, but he tells himself that it's for the best.

And then Will's suddenly grabbing his head and turning him so they're face to face, and Will somehow manages to look stern even while crying. "Mike, if you *ever* feel like that again, please, *please*, just call, or radio, or sneak over here. I don't care if it's three in the morning, I *will* be there for you." Mike's not sure how to respond – he *really* doesn't want to burden Will, Will who has been through far more than any 14 year old should ever have to go through, but he knows Will won't let him say no – so he mutters out a quick 'okay'. Apparently, Will can see right through him, because he just says, "Mike..." in that disappointed tone that Mike always caves to.

Just like always, Mike crumbles. "I just don't think you should be worrying yourself so much over someone so *worthless*," he practically spits out the word. "I know I'm not important, okay? I'm just the so-called leader of the party, but what good is a goddamn leader when he's even more lost than everyone else? And, yeah, sure, I gathered the party together when things went wrong, but no one ever needs motivation anymore. I should be the one who's there for *you*, but I

can't even do that right! All I ever do is mess up everything good in my life!" He's almost yelling now, and he distantly hopes that Jonathan knows better than to come in. Spilling his entire bag of secrets is bad enough, and he *really* doesn't want to do it in front of someone he knows next to nothing about.

Suddenly, Will's hands are grabbing at Mike's shoulders just like earlier, but this time they're rough, squeezing *hard*, and Will's shaking Mike just the slightest bit. "Mike, why don't you ever believe me? I've told you so many times that you're my best friend, that I wouldn't be who I am today without you, and it's all true but you just can't seem to *understand* that. I want you to take what I'm about to say as fact.

"Michael Wheeler, you are one of the most important people in my life. You're not *just* a leader or *just* a motivator – you're so much more than that. You took action when I went missing, and yeah, you led the others, but I'm pretty sure you would've went with or without them, right? You were the one who hid El, you kept her safe when everyone else was against her. Without you, the gate wouldn't be closed, and El wouldn't be safe living with Hopper, she'd probably be stuck back in the lab because no matter how awesome she is, she couldn't hide forever on her own. Without you, I wouldn't have any friends at all. Remember when you told me that asking me to be your friend was the best thing you've ever done?" Will stops, and it takes Mike a moment to realize that he actually wants an answer. After Mike's quick nod in response, Will says something that hits Mike like a train.

"I think telling you yes was the best thing *I've* ever done."

Mike's world stops for a moment. *He* was the best thing that's ever happened to someone? He was the best thing that's ever happened to *Will*? Mike feels like he's going to explode from the hurricane of emotions he's being forced through today. He reaches over and practically smashes his lips into Will's. The kiss is much softer and sweeter than Mike's hasty start to it warrants, but he's not complaining. He doesn't even complain about the slightly salty taste both of their lips have from all the crying the two have done that day. Mike's just floored that he's *kissing Will Byers* for a second time! The boy he thinks is perfect loves him back! And he forgets the rough recovery he's going to have to go through, he doesn't think about the

times he's going to fall back into old habits or the trouble he's going to have trying to be nice to himself, because for the first time in a long time, he is completely and utterly distracted from his thoughts.

Mike's kissing the most beautiful boy in the world, who thinks *he's* beautiful, and they'll figure it out when they get there.

2. lost & found

lost & found

Warnings: self hatred, self harm (especially in paragraphs 5-6), suicidal thoughts, suicide attempt, non-specific but descriptive mental disorders

It's two in the morning, and Mike's laying in his bed, awake, staring blankly at the ceiling. He tried to sleep, but his thoughts were racing far too fast and he couldn't keep his eyes shut. His eyes are tracing patterns in the ceiling, and his brain is whispering things to him, mean things, horrible things (true things, he thinks bitterly). That he's a waste. He's a burden. Will was only taking pity on him when he said he'd be there, Will just didn't want to have the guilt poured onto him when Mike inevitably tried something. And yeah, Mike kind of wants to hate himself for thinking something so rude about Will, but at the same time, he's pretty sure it *has* to be true, since there's no way even Will, kindhearted as he is, would be able to love someone like Mike.

Mike wants so badly to believe what Will had told him, he wants to believe all the kisses and words of affection are real, he wants to believe Will genuinely loves him back. Some days, he actually *does* believe it – those are the days that he doesn't feel quite so disgusting, those are the days he feels like maybe he's loveable. Those days don't happen often, though. He usually just feels like a literal piece of garbage. Not something you dread even touching because it's so gross, but more like a moldy piece of bread – not something completely nauseating, but still bad enough that you throw it out immediately. He wonders how hard it is for everyone around him to not walk away from him every day. He thinks they're much stronger than him, considering that he's wanted to escape himself for a long time. He knows it's hard for *him*.

He hates days like these; it feels like he's somehow gotten *worse* rather than better, and he feels guilty, because that just means Will's wasting his time on something he can't fix. Mike's too broken, he's crumbled into tiny shards and it's impossible to figure out which

pieces fit together. He tries to tell himself that he has more good days now, that he hasn't cut in months, so he must be recovering in some way, but the not-so-little voice in his head reminds him that his good days are still so rare, and even though he hasn't cut he still *wants* to. He still gets the urge to grab his razor and make up for lost time, but Will would find out. Sometimes, Will asks to see his arms, and the delightfully proud look on his face when all he sees are old scars makes Mike feel even worse whenever he thinks about cutting. But no matter how terrible it makes him feel, the itch in his arms persists, practically begging him to do something to make it stop. Usually he can ignore it.

Today, on the other hand, the voice is too loud, the itch won't subside after he scratches at the scars. Today, he needs more.

He's out of bed and digging through his sock drawer before he can process what he's doing. He pulls out the razor, and shimmies his pants down until his thighs are exposed. Will would see if he did it on his arms, but he doubts Will would think to check his legs. Mike presses the razor against his skin, but then he pauses, just for a moment, to whisper out "I'm sorry." He drags the blade across his thigh, over and over, and as he's cherishing the sweet kiss of the metal on his skin, he's apologizing for each time he cuts. He's sorry for breaking his (albeit unspoken) promise to Will. He's sorry for giving in to temptation. He's sorry for putting them all through even more troubles, he's sorry for being like this, he's sorry, he's sorry, he's *sorry*.

Mike finally stops when his hand is shaking too violently to hold the razor, and the blade falls onto his lap. When he looks down at his thighs, he can't help but gasp at the sight of so much blood. His leg is a mess, blood flowing everywhere, and he's never cut so much in his life. He curses when he realizes he cut far deeper than intended, and he scrambles off his bed to grab an old shirt from under his bed, pressing the shirt down on his leg. He winces in pain at the pressure, but keeps pushing down until, finally, the bleeding slows down enough for him to ease up and fumble for a roll of bandages. He wraps his leg up haphazardly, the bandages ending up painfully tight around his leg, but he doesn't care. He's far too out of it to worry about washing up like usual, and all he does is shuck off his

bloodstained pants to clean up later and he lets himself soak in the temporary giddy feeling it had brought onto him.

When he's finally come down from the euphoria, guilt hits him like a train. Will had trusted Mike to reach out for help, he had trusted Mike to not give in to his thoughts, and Mike had just gone and completely betrayed Will's trust with no thought about it. Mike is mortified – he's been trying so hard to stop lying so much, repeating *friends don't lie* trying to keep himself from falling back into the habit, but all that has apparently been for naught. He decides it's probably best if he never shows his face in public again and lets himself become nothing more than a faint memory in the back of everyone's minds. He broke his promise, and he knows Will will eventually find out (that boy is far too observant, sometimes). Even imagining Will's possible reaction fills Mike up with dread; his mind feeds him several scenarios, none of them good, such as Will getting mad or crying or breaking up with him, because *clearly* he'd overestimated the level of trust between them. The last one makes his body seize up, and he spends far too long thinking about how Will's face looks when he's angry, how Will would, for once, be glaring at Mike with hatred in his eyes.

He finally shakes himself out of it when the thought pops into his head. *You need to tell him, anyways.* At first, he panics at the thought – he'd *just* gotten through imagining all the different ways he could mess this up – but then he manages to reason with himself that Will would probably be *more* upset if Mike never told him, and he had to find out by himself. That would practically *scream* that Mike doesn't trust him. Mike doesn't want Will to think that, *ever*, because it isn't true in any way possible. So, Mike stands, wincing at the pain that wracks through his leg and quickly readjusts his stance so he's putting less weight on it, and he limps around his room, throwing some things into his backpack for no reason other than his gut insisting on it. The rest of his bandages, his walkie talkie, and a stuffed animal from when he was a kid that he has to dig out of his closet. He doesn't bother taking out his school supplies before he's changing into an outfit he doesn't even look at and sneaking down the stairs and out the front door.

Mike's a little over halfway to Will's house when he changes his mind.

It's like a switch in his head got flipped, because all of a sudden, he's scared again. Scared of what Will is going to say, scared of fumbling over his words so much and annoying Will, scared of not being able to breathe and breaking out in tears. He stops in the middle of the road, not caring to think about the warnings all the adults would tell them in elementary school (always stay on the sidewalks or near the side of the street, never walk in the middle of the road or you could get hit by a car) since the only people out at night are partying teenagers, and they're always drunk and loud enough for him to have enough warning to get out of the way. Mike nearly turns his bike around and heads home, but quite frankly, he's a little afraid of going back there. He's afraid of how tempting it might be to keep cutting, how alluring the blade is every time he's in his room. Instead, he starts pedaling again, but he's not heading toward Will's house. He's biking towards the cliff.

Mike skids to a halt as he comes up to the area that overlooks the water. He puts down his kickstand, plops his backpack on the ground, and collapses in a heap onto the stone, panting. His leg is screaming in pain, and he's tearing up at the burning sensation that's overtaken his thigh. He raises his hand to his mouth and bites down, *hard*, something that he had discovered a little after he first started cutting – he'd done it out of pure instinct, and it helped distract him from the pain. He fights with the button of his jeans (which, he just now realizes, are just slightly too small, even though he thinks they're pretty new), trying to pull down his pants one-handed, and he distantly thinks about how *weird* this would look to an onlooker, but he pushes that thought aside in favour of glancing down at his thighs.

The bloodied bandages make something stir uncomfortably in Mike's stomach, and he slaps a hand over his mouth, quickly dragging himself over to the bushes, but nothing actually comes up, so he stumbles back over to his things. He's slightly concerned over how squeamish around blood he's been today; he's never been bad around blood before, hell, people have been *killed* in front of him, so why is he so affected by it now, of all times? Is it just because it's his own blood? Or is it because there's so much? Both? He doesn't know, but he thinks there would've been a much better time or place for it to kick in. He decides to leave that for later – he *really* doesn't want to

throw up right now – and he looks around at his familiar surroundings, memories surfacing as his eyes fix onto the exposed cliff edge.

He remembers standing there before his life went to shit. He had stood there, but he wasn't alone that time. Will, Lucas, and Dustin had stood there with them, talking and laughing without a care. He remembers that when they'd turned to step back, Lucas had slipped on a rock under his shoe and nearly fell back, and it was only thanks to some quick thinking from Dustin that Lucas still stood here today. Mike's pretty sure that was the first time any of their lives have been in danger. It was the first time he'd ever seen genuine terror on Lucas' face, and the four of them had come together in a hug after Dustin pulled Lucas several steps away from the edge. They had sat there for who knows how long, finding comfort in the warmth of each other, and after they pulled back Lucas had smiled and thanked them wetly. They decided to spend the rest of the day talking in Mike's basement, and before they left to go home, Lucas had pulled them all into another hug. For weeks after that, Mike had nightmares of Dustin not grabbing Lucas in time, and watching wide eyed as his friend fell over the edge. He had blamed himself, and well after waking up one thing he'd thought in the midst of the dream stuck with him.

It should have been me.

That's the first time Mike ever felt worthless. Lying awake in bed, head on his tearstained pillow, it dawned upon him that they'd be better off without him. It was the start of his mental spiral that led him to where he sat today, bleeding from his thigh.

He remembers the day he jumped off the cliff. He remembers being scared. He had lost everyone – Will was missing, and Mike himself had caused Lucas and El to run off – other than Dustin, Dustin was the only one he had left, and he'd be damned if he let something happen to him when he could've done something. So he had stepped over to the edge, ignoring Dustin yelling at him to *stop*, and he thought back to the dreams where Lucas had died, he thought about the guilt he'd felt. He sent a mental apology to everyone, said an extra one to Dustin as he yelled his name, and stepped off as Troy reached one. The fall had felt like it lasted forever, and he had taken the time to think. This was his last action, sacrificing himself for the

good of his friend. It almost felt too good to be something *he* had done. But that was it; he'd never get to see El, Lucas, *Will* again, Dustin would have to tell everyone else, Will would get back without Mike there to greet him. Then, it occurred to him that they'd probably be glad to be rid of him. (But he hadn't died. El had saved him, and he got swept back into the action so quickly that he didn't have time to think about what had happened until after El had disappeared, bringing the Demogorgon down with her.)

It wasn't until early May of 1985 that he stood on the edge again. He'd biked there a few hours after school let out, and he'd told his mom that he'd be back by quarter to nine. He hadn't planned to go there, but it was like his feet had a mind of their own, and he'd ended up there without even realizing it. He was too absorbed in his thoughts and how his arms itched to think about where he was going. He's pretty sure he had made his way there because of how often he'd thought about doing just that. As soon as he got there, he dropped his bike on the ground and walked to the edge. And he just... stood. Staring down at the water, he took his time to think; no one would be looking for him for at least a few hours, he wasn't in a rush. He remembered what it had felt like to fall – he remembered the wind in his hair, the air being ripped from his lungs and the weightless feeling. It had been so utterly exhilarating, like a rollercoaster, and he was a little excited to feel it again. He had smiled at the memory, and he was just about to step off once more when it occurred to him that he hadn't left a note. He didn't want his family to worry (and by family, he means Nancy and his friends), so he heaved a sad sigh and stepped back so his toes weren't off the edge.

Mike's staring at the exposed edge now, and he thinks that maybe, *just maybe*, this time he should go through with it. Maybe this time he could- no. He didn't leave a note this time either. Instead, he stretches his arm out, not wanting to move and aggravate the cuts even more, and he manages to drag his backpack over to him. Opening it up, he reaches for his walkie talkie, but his hand stalls in midair as he sets his eyes on the notebooks sitting inside. *He could write a note.* He's oh so tempted to reach over and flip to a blank page, but he doesn't even know what he'd say. And even if he knew what to say, he *promised* Will. He promised that he'd ask for help if he ever came to something like this, and he intends to keep it. He reaches out and grabs the

walkie talkie resolutely.

Will's lying in bed, awake after having had a nightmare, when his walkie talkie crackles on. He startles at the sound, breathing quicker as he quickly scrubs at the tears on his cheeks. Through the static, he can make out Mike begging him to pick up. Mike's voice is hoarse, and when he snuffles wetly, it hits Will that Mike sounds like he's on the brink of tears, and he scrambles out from under his covers and over to the radio. He sits on the floor and waits until Mike's voice stops coming through to press down the button. "Mike? What's wrong?"

At first, there's no response, and Will starts to wonder if Mike's waiting for him to say *over*. But then, Mike speaks up again. "Will, it... it's gotten bad again." His breathing is labored, and Will is both confused and concerned before he figures out what Mike's talking about, but when he does, his heart drops into his stomach.

"Oh, *god*, okay. Um, can you come here or should I come to you?"

"Can you come here? Please?" Mike sounds desperate, and Will's moving to stand when he speaks again. "I'm at the cliff."

Will feels cold, cold dread creep under his skin when he hears Mike's whispered words. "Okay, Mike, just- just stay where you are, okay? I'm on my way, *please* don't do anything, stay safe," Will rattles out nervously, and stands up, swiftly changing out of his pajamas, writing a note just in case his mom comes to check on him, and, after a little thought, he grabs a water bottle that was sitting on his desk. He always has to chug some water after crying, and he's pretty sure one (or both) of them are going to be shedding some tears today. Considering how close he feels to tears right now, it's a safe assumption, he thinks. He slips the bottle into his jacket pocket and, just as he reaches to open the window, Mike croaks out one last word.

"*Hurry.*"

Will gives the radio a long look before he slips out his window.

Riding his bike on the unpaved path in the woods isn't his best idea, but it's faster than he'd be able to run while dragging along his bike, so he does his best to keep steady along the uneven dirt. He's trying his best to stay calm, he's helped Mike before, but then he remembers that he's never been in a situation like this and he panics all over again. He can't help but feel scared that Mike's going to do something terrible to himself and it'll be all his fault. Part of him argues that he can't expect to know what's going on with Mike all the time, but the rest of him screams back that they're *boyfriends*, Will should be able to help Mike with things like this, he should be able to tell when Mike's hurting. His internal argument comes to a halt when he spots Mike, who's sprawled on the ground, from a distance. From where he is, he can barely even tell it's Mike; it's more of a blob of colour that differs from the rest of the ground, but Will knows it's Mike because what else could it be? A passed out drunk, maybe, but they usually stick to where the alcohol is. It's gotta be Mike.

Will stands up on his bike, pedaling as fast as he can over to Mike. As soon as he gets there, he's off his bike and padding over to Mike. For a moment, the world stands still and he just stares, taking in his boyfriend. Mike's wearing a pair of jeans that are several inches too short, mismatched sneakers, and a wrinkled polo shirt that he outgrew a while back (and if Will's eyes linger on the way his sleeves are riding up so he can see the white lines underneath, if he gets a little choked up at the reminder of the day he first saw what's going through Mike's head, he does his best to not show it). But then, the world starts moving again when Mike sobs quietly, and Will kneels down beside him. He reaches out, and his hands hang over Mike at first; he's unsure of what to do, he always is, but somehow his instincts always guide him through (mostly) safe and sound, so he trusts his gut and pulls Mike up into a firm hug. Mike lets himself be dragged like a ragdoll, and he ends up sitting on Will's lap – Will's cheeks burn, but he shoves that to the back of his mind and, instead, focuses on situating Mike's limp body into a position that's comfortable for both of them.

Mike's head ends up tucked neatly under Will's chin, and the first movement he makes is when he nuzzles into Will's collarbone, and he wraps his arms around Will slowly. Will breathes out Mike's name idly, and apparently, Mike takes that as his cue to explain himself. "I-

I... um, I, I've been- I..."

"Mike," Will interrupts gently, "it's okay. Take your time." But Mike ignores it; he just keeps trying to stammer out what seems to be several different sentences at the same time, changing his mind halfway through and switching to another, all while his chest is heaving violently as he shakes from the dry sobs that jerk through him. All Will can do is shush him, and he feels helpless as he runs a hand over Mike's back. Then, he pulls Mike away, just enough so he can look at him, and grabs Mike's chin. He lifts his chin so they're making eye contact, and he tries to morph his face into a gentle, calm expression. "Hey, *hey*. Don't rush, you're fine. I'm not leaving until you want me to."

Those were the key words, apparently, because then Mike's face crumples even more and the floodgates open, tears pouring down his cheeks, and he buries his face back into Will's chest. He can feel the tears soak through his shirt and onto his skin, and he plants one hand in Mike's hair, sifting through the soft curls and brushing out any tangles he comes across. They sit there for what feels like an hour, the silence that surrounds them only broken by Mike's whimpers and Will's murmured words of comfort. Mike's sobs eventually quiet, and when the cold night wind brushes past them, the two shiver simultaneously. The moment broke, and Will squeezes Mike tight, placing a kiss on the top of Mike's head before Mike slides off of Will and onto the ground.

Mike's eyes are red and his cheeks are still wet from the tears, and the sight of him is so pitiful that Will gets the urge to pull him right back into their hug, but he restrains himself – he knows Mike needs to do this, they have to talk or nothing will ever change. Looking into his eyes makes Will feel like he's drowning in sadness, so he busies himself by looking at all of the other (pretty) parts of Mike's face; the freckles that dance across his cheeks, his somehow always chapped lips that Will still can't believe he's had the chance to feel, *anything* to distract him from the streaks on Mike's cheeks and the way his eyebrows are furrowed.

"I... I've been l-lying." Will's eyes snap back to Mike's at the confession. *Lying?*

"About what?" He asks tentatively, unable to take his eyes off Mike's face. He sees the guilt that's spread across his face, and he sees the panic slowly creeping back into his expression. Will remembers the way Mike looked when he had a panic attack, and he can see Mike slowly slipping into it again, so he does the only thing he can think to do – he takes Mike's hands into his and squeezes.

Mike takes a deep breath and continues, "I've been lying. I've been s-saying I'm getting better, but, but sometimes I feel even worse than before and I hate it. I feel- I feel like I'm *broken*, like I can't be fixed, and you're just wasting your time when you could be doing something, anything so much more worth it. I just, I don't know how you do it." Mike's voice is choked up, and it tugs harshly at Will's heartstrings. He wants to interrupt, he wants to tell Mike that it's not true, that he'd stay even if Mike really *were* unfixable (which he *isn't*), that Mike's always worth his time, but if he says something now, he's not sure Mike would ever finish what he wants to say.

"And sometimes, I think I might be getting better, but then I just spiral back into it all over again, and I stopped cutting but I still wanted to, I still *want* to. There's this... itch in my arms. Most of the time, it just goes away if I scratch enough but- but tonight it wouldn't go away no matter how hard I tried to make it. I couldn't, it just- it just *wouldn't*, I'm sorry, please don't hate me, I'm sorry, sorry, I'm s-s-sorry." Mike's shaking by the time he finishes speaking, eyes unfocused and lip trembling. Will's about to ask why Mike thinks he hates him when Mike pulls his hands out of Will's, and Mike's pulling his pants down. Panic washes over Will – what the hell does Mike think he's doing, they're in *public*! – that is, until he sees it. There's bandages wrapped messily around Mike's thigh, the strips crossing over each other in a chaotic fashion, so unlike the careful precision Mike would usually put into anything like this, and they look like they're extremely tight, the fat of Mike's thigh sprouting up and out where the bandages end. Oh yeah, and they're *sopping red with blood*.

Mike sees the way Will's face shifts, and he thinks *this is it, he's going to leave, he's going to yell, he's going to be mad at me*. He stutters out again, "P-p-please, *please* don't h-hate me." Will's arm moves in his peripheral vision, and he flinches back, eyes squeezed shut, ready for

a punch, a slap, anything. But it never comes. Instead, there's a gentle touch on his leg below the bandages, and he slowly opens his eyes to see a sad, but understanding look on Will's face, and there's a silent question in the way his eyebrows are quirked, the way his lips are pursed; *can I help?* He nods his head once, and Will moves his hand up to the bandages, but then he pauses. He looks around, and Mike feels useless (as usual) as Will pulls over Mike's backpack, digging through it. Mike watches through a pained haze as Will holds up the roll of bandages triumphantly. Will runs his hands over the bandages until he finds the piece Mike had hurriedly tucked under the rest, and he quickly unravels the soaking wet bandages. He drops it on the ground next to them with a disgusted expression on his face.

Will then reaches into his pocket, and, to Mike's confusion, pulls out a mostly full bottle of water. Mike almost wants to ask why he has water in his pocket and how it didn't fall out, but he knows he'd stutter and sob and it'd just make him feel even worse. Mike zones out after that – he feels numb, like he's not entirely in his body anymore, and although he watches it happen with bleary eyes, he can't feel Will pouring water on his thigh, he can't feel Will wipe it dry with his jacket sleeve. He can't feel the bandages being wrapped around his leg, tight but not too tight. He *can* feel, however, the way his eyes are stinging, the way his cheeks are burning, and he wishes he couldn't feel that either. Will nudges him to say he's done, and Mike pulls his pants back up as quickly as he can – he wants to hide it, he wants to pretend it's not there, he wants to *forget*. He knows Will won't let him.

He opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out. He's choked up, there's a lump in his throat, and he can't speak. He looks at Will with tears in his eyes, hoping Will gets what he's trying to say. And Will does, evidently, because then he's being pulled up off the ground to stand on shaking legs. When Will lets go, he stumbles almost immediately into Will's chest – his legs are asleep. So they stand, Mike leaning on Will, until his legs are awake, and then they're getting onto their bikes, Will carrying Mike's backpack. They ride slowly to Will's house; they'd picked Will's both because it was closer, and because if either Joyce or Jonathan wake up, they'll be *far* more understanding than Mike's parents, who've been getting more and more strict as Mike's mood deteriorates. They somehow make it to

the house without saying a word.

When they go to sneak through Will's window, Mike nearly dies of embarrassment as Will insists on helping him through, lifting his leg carefully upwards and over the windowsill. Mike stands in the middle of the room as Will bustles around the room, putting the backpack on his desk chair, kicking off his shoes and stripping off his jacket. Mike feels disconnected whenever there's nothing he can do, like he's losing control of himself, like he's slipping even further from his so-called leader position. Usually he can figure out a way to help, usually he can put off the feeling of uselessness for when he's lying in bed, sleepless, but all he manages to do is toe off his sneakers before Will's wrapping him in a blanket and pushing him over to the bed. They sit, Mike looking anywhere but at his boyfriend, and Will snakes an arm around Mike, pulling him so his head rests on his shoulder.

Will breaks the silence with a murmur. "I don't hate you. I'll keep telling you that until you believe it." Mike's pretty sure that means he should start talking. He tilts his face further into Will's shoulder, breathing as deeply as he can manage, trying to sort out his thoughts enough to speak. It takes a few minutes of sitting in comfortable silence before Mike tries it.

"I couldn't sleep. I tried, I really did, but I just, I couldn't stop thinking. I know I'm a burden, I'm a mistake, I'm unlovable. And I want to believe you love me, I want to believe it, but I can't help feeling like you're just taking pity on me. I'm sorry, I know you're not like that, but it's just that- it's hard to believe even you could love a piece of shit like me. I can't believe how you've put up with me for so long." Will looks like he's going to interrupt, like he's going to tell Mike that it's not true, but Mike doesn't want to hear it, not yet, so he surges on, not giving Will a chance to speak. "I hadn't cut until tonight, I swear, but the itch wouldn't leave. I didn't even think about it, I just- I just did it. I felt so, so guilty, because I let you down, but at the same time it felt so *good*. And I hated it. I've been trying to stop lying, I really want to get better, but I didn't want to tell you, I was scared you'd hate me. I was going to tell you, though, I was going to ride over here, but I got scared. I was scared that- scared that you'd..." He trails off, burrowing his face further into Will's warmth,

desperately trying to fight back tears.

The silence that settles in the room is thick, heavy. Or, at least, it was, until Will reaches up and tangles his fingers into Mike's hair, scratching at Mike's scalp. "I never thought you'd stop cutting altogether. I knew it'd take you a while to get better, and, yeah, I'm always happy every time I see you haven't cut, but here's the thing I don't think you get. I'm proud of you every time you manage to not cut, because I *know* you want to. I knew you'd end up cutting again, because getting better after something like this is hard; I know that better than anyone. But you know what? I'm glad you were able to tell me, I'm glad you could push past it just enough to reach out. You might not think you're getting any better, but I can see it. I can tell you are, because just the fact that you radioed tonight proves that you're not trying to handle it alone anymore. It means that you're starting to understand I'm here for you."

The combination of Will's hand rubbing at his head just the way he likes it, his words spoken in the most loving tone Mike's ever heard, and the soft eyes he's looking down at Mike with makes Mike melt into his boyfriend, and Will uses his free arm to hold Mike even closer to him. For a long time, they just relax into each other, and Mike feels content for the first time that day. He thinks, maybe, just maybe, he should take this chance to tell Will everything, because he feels so completely comfortable in this moment, something that so rarely happens. He feels like now is the time to let go of it all, to share his thoughts with Will and maybe then he can have someone there for him, someone who he can trust with everything.

So he talks. He talks and talks, he talks about anything and everything, spitting out all the thoughts in his head without pausing. He rants about his appearance, his problems with control, how he hates that he can't stop himself from thinking like this. He talks about how scared he is all the time, how people looking at him makes his chest tighten uncomfortably and how he sometimes cries because of minor things, and how childish crying at the toaster not working made him feel. He talks for what's probably an hour before he runs out of bad things to say about himself, and for a while he just whispers apologies on repeat until Will pulls back just enough to kiss him softly, quickly, and Mike finds himself mumbling about Will,

instead.

"Will, Will, babe, I love you, you know that, right? I love you, you're the best boyfriend I could ever ask for. You're so good, so nice, I'm so glad we met. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I know you don't like yourself that much either, I know you have a lot of trouble keeping yourself together, and I hope you know that I'm here for you, too. Because I am, I am. This isn't just about me, I'm not the only one having troubles, so don't put me before yourself, okay?" His words are slurred, he's talking too quickly, but he needs to say it. Will isn't a very light sleeper – he was, for a while, after the Upside Down and the Mind Flayer, but he's finally started feeling safe in his own home – so there was no way he'd have responded so quickly unless he was already awake. The only times Will ever stays up late are when he's either messing around with their friends, or if he's been plagued with nightmares or flashbacks. He doesn't want Will to put anyone before himself, especially not *Mike*, of all people. He lifts his head off Will's shoulder to look Will in the eyes, trying to show Will that he's serious.

All Will says is, "I had a nightmare. But you're here now. It's okay." Then, he kisses Mike's cheek and primly props his chin on Mike's blanket covered shoulder. "I was only awake for about half an hour before you radioed. I know I can come to you, you made sure I knew that a long time ago. But, right now, it's my turn to take care of you. I've been doing better lately, but you need someone to keep you standing until you can do it by yourself again, and I'm going to be that someone for you. I love you too much to let you fall back down alone, Mikey. I'm gonna be there for you, and we're gonna get through it all together. No matter what happens, I'll be here with you. I've told you this before, but I know your brain likes to say otherwise, so I'll say it again: you changed my life for the better, you've been there for me through everything, you're the prettiest boy I've ever met, and I love you so much it hurts."

Mike can feel his face flush bright red, and he has to wipe at his eyes – it's almost morbidly funny how much he's cried today. No matter how many times Will says it, hearing him say *I love you* always makes Mike's heart flutter. Right here, right now, he feels comfortable in his own skin, he feels like it's okay for him to not be in complete control,

for once. In Will's arms, where they share their body heat and their issues, is where he feels the best he has in years. It's the place where he feels loved, he feels alive, he feels beautiful. Will has a weird way of doing it, and Mike's never understood it; Will makes him feel good about himself even when nothing else helps. Maybe it's because, out of every person Mike's ever met, Will's the one who knows him the best, the one who understands everything Mike's going through the best. (Of course, the fact that Mike's in love with him helps.)

They sit for a long time, just wrapped in each other's arms, leaving any other words unspoken but still there, before Will shifts the two of them over to lie down, not letting go of Mike the whole time. Mike's thoughts are silent for the time being, and Will's always said he sleeps easier with someone else there, so Mike feels content falling asleep with Will pressed tightly against him. Just as he's dozing off, he feels a peck on his lips, and he manages to smile fondly before he falls asleep. He dreams of looking at himself in the mirror and liking it, and Will's by his side, grinning at the look on Mike's face. He hopes that'll someday be more than just a dream.

(He wakes to the click of a camera. Blinking groggily, he manages to make out a blur that he thinks is Jonathan. Then, Jonathan apparently notices he's awake and creeps quickly out of the room. Mike's tempted to go after him, but then he realizes he's utterly tangled together with Will, who looks so peaceful that Mike doesn't want to disturb him for anything. He sighs and lays back down, tightening his arms around Will just the slightest bit. A little more sleep couldn't hurt.)